Punctuating Punctuation in the English Classroom

By Judith E. Moy

Even second language teachers concede that punctuation is not as uniform and prescriptive as was once assumed and that teaching this subskill can fall into a mechanical, monotonous abyss. If we encourage our students to explore a diversity of written and entertainment media, they can learn to discover and appreciate permissible variations and violations of punctuation beyond the "prescriptive" dictates of usage that they were formerly taught. Various novel and thought-provoking assignments can be introduced which require the learner to interact with authentic English, such as collecting data samples from magazines, listening to the news to compare reported and direct speech, and administering a punctuation "test" to peers and other teachers. The benefits of this discovery approach to teaching punctuation will increase students' motivation, arouse and sustain their interest, and foster independence-all significant pedagogical considerations in language learning.

...Ther is so great diversite In English, and in wryting of oure tonge, So prey I god that non myswrite thee.

Geoffrey Chaucer

Glossing the Glossary Pages of Magazines

During the initial phase of data collection, the teacher may wish to focus on one form of punctuation such as the apostrophe. (See Footnote 1 below) The students can then be asked to scrutinize advertisements in English magazines to find occurrences of the apostrophe, which can prove to be an amusing assignment outside the confines of the classroom. A viable area to examine would be possessive forms which fulfill two functions-as a possessive determiner before a noun phrase (referred to as possessive adjectives in traditional grammars) or as a replacement for a noun phrase inflected for possession. This inductive exercise is simplified by virtue of data being readily available. There is a relatively controlled number of student responses, and learners' findings generate animated group discussion. After evaluating the occurrences of the apostrophe, the teacher can illustrate the different functions of the possessive to reinforce patterns of usage:

Poss. Determiner: This is Sheila's book.
Poss. Pronoun: This book is Sheila's.

Expanding the setting-beyond the typical apostrophe. In the second stage, students can be asked to scrutinize advertisements that are marked by more than one "sign" to insure they collect a variety of data. For example, students can look for other symbols that perform the same function as the apostrophe, e.g., Macy*s or Steve s Ice Cream (see G. Little 1993:354).

Analysis . At this stage, students are asked to examine their collections in order to develop a set of generalizations which could describe the appearance of punctuation marks, in this case the apostrophe. Students will discover that their generalizations sometimes conform to patterns prescribed in handbooks or reference guides, and sometimes they do not, as in this Dannon yogurt magazine ad: "New Dannon Sprinkl'Ins Crazy Crunch is Creating Quite a Stir." It is advisable for the EFL teacher to restrict the students' discovery method of collecting data by providing a specific category of magazines. Students can be led to discover "nonstandard" examples of punctuation in group work. Learners can draw on concrete, contextualized examples which vividly illustrate the functional usage of apostrophes and also realize that such nonstandard styles are not stigmatized.

At this stage, the teacher may wish to provide exercises to accommodate learners who prefer a deductive learning style. For example, the teacher can focus on the written forms of the possessive. In addition to both the determiner and pronominal possessive forms, there are two other major ways of signaling possession in English. The first is in writing, by inflecting regular singular nouns and irregular plural nouns not ending in "-s" with *'s:*

    the baby's crib
    the women's room

or by adding an apostrophe after the "s" ending of regular plural nouns.

    the girls' shopping trip
    the boys' toys

Further, it can be demonstrated that the apostrophe suffixed to regular plural nouns that end in "s" does not alter the pronunciation, but the *'s* suffixed to singular nouns and irregular plurals is realized in speech as /-s/ when occurring after voiceless consonants, -/z/ when following voiced consonants and vowels and /?z/ after sibilants (/s/, /z/, /s/, /z/, /c/ and /j/). For example:

    Mac's /m`ks/
    Sam's /s`mz/
    Grace's /greys.?z/
    horse's /hors.?z/
    watch's /wac.?z/

Another way of signaling possession is by using the possessive "of" form where the possessor and possessed object are inverted if one compares this order with the inflected 's form:

the man's name-the name of the man.

It is important to alert learners to the fact that possessive 's and "of" forms are not always interchangeable. At this point, the teacher may need to distinguish the 's form with [+human] head nouns and the "of" form with [+nonhuman] head nouns since many grammar texts instruct the learner to distinguish these forms:

Janet's husband (human head noun) and
The end of the road (nonhuman), but:
The alligator's tail is thrashing.

Here, the teacher needs to understand the linguistic rules, particularly that the head noun is syntactically and semantically the most important noun in a phrase, clause, or construction that has two or more nouns. (See Footnote 2 below) According to a study by Khampang (see Footnote 3 below) to test native English speakers' preferences for the possessive 's versus the "of" forms, subjects reported a preference for the former when the head noun was animate and even with inanimate head nouns when the noun was perceived as performing some action, e.g., *The train's arrival was delayed* , as opposed to *The arrival of the train was delayed* . (See Footnote 4 below) For more advanced students, the teacher can illustrate a few less common applications of the 's possessive:

Double Poss.:	Hank's brother' s car
Special NP:	The game's history
	London's water supply
Natural Phenomenon	The sun's rotation.

Conversely, the "of" form is preferred generally with lifeless things as in *He stood at the foot of the bed* as compared to *He stood at the bed's foot.* *But, Khampang (1973) notes the "of" form is preferred with [+human] head nouns when the modifier noun is lengthy: *He's the son of the well-known politician* versus *He's the well-known politician's son* or with long, double possessives which, when shortened, normally take *'s* : *What can I do for the husband of Mrs. Smith's niece?* Likewise, if the medium requires a formal register of English, the "of" form may be preferred (the sonnets of Shakespeare), whereas *'s* may signal informality (Shakespeare's sonnets). It is incumbent on the EFL teacher to be aware of these linguistic applications concerning levels of formality in English and corresponding punctuation, as it has been found that the learner's ability to distinguish such variation is not so clear-cut and often accounts for errors.

Other reasons that account for interference may be the student's native language or the frequency of certain inflectional morphemes. For instance, the *'s* form occurs relatively infrequently in English compared to other inflectional morphemes such as the plural, past tense, and progressive. According to Larsen-Freeman (1976) and Dulay and Burt (1974), when a morpheme is of low frequency in the learner's input, it is acquired later than the more frequently occurring morphemes. Regardless of the source of difficulty, ESL learners' ubiquitous possessive usage errors frequently produce these two patterns that exemplify over generalization of the "of" form: **The car of my friend is new* ; and oversimplification, i.e., omitting the *'s* altogether, thereby signaling possession by juxtaposition of two NP's: **My friend car is new.*

If possible, the teacher should either elicit further examples from the students or provide more elaborate contexts for the above analyses.

One final note concerns the functional analysis of the above forms. It is important to illustrate how form and meaning (the grammatical and semantic levels of language) do not always exhibit

a one-to-one correspondence. For instance, possessives can express meanings other than the traditional notion of possession (i.e., belonging to) such as:

Description:	A debtor's prison - a prison for debtors
Amount/quantity:	Three dollars' worth of gas
Relationship/association:	John's roommate or NY's skyscrapers
Part/whole:	My brother's hand
Origin/agent:	Shakespeare's comedies

It may also be important to address "noun adjuncts" which consist of two nouns juxtaposed to create a noun compound. The noun in an attributive position may function like an adjective: jewelry store, table leg or kitchen chair. (See Footnote 5 below) Since the focus is on punctuation, the latter examples with the "of" usage may serve as a point of contrast with the 's possessive forms. The above exercises illustrate how other linguistic aspects of English can be integrated into the punctuation lesson grammar, semantics, pronunciation, and morphology (e.g., the morphophonemic alternations of 's in "Mac's" (/s/), "Sam's" (/z/) and "Grace's" (/?z/).

Reported vs. Direct Speech

In an exercise contrasting reported and direct speech, the video medium can be exploited to integrate the basic skills along with the punctuation subskill. For example, my upper intermediate or advanced students viewed a lengthy news clip from the *CNN Headline News* on the O. J. Simpson murder case which they had been following. It is suggested that the clip be at least two minutes in duration to provide sufficient, substantive information to facilitate comprehension. The teacher may want to distribute an "advance organizer" to prime the students on the main theme of the clip.

During the pre-listening phase, students brainstorm in groups about various aspects of the O. J. Simpson case to generate a list of background information which the teacher can write on the board. This list will accommodate both auditory and visual learners. During the initial listening phase, the teacher plays the clip for global listening. The teacher then instructs the students to listen to the videotape again and to take notes only on the main ideas. For example, in this particular clip of November 21, 1994, the major headline concerned whether Judge Lance Ito's wife, a Los Angeles police captain, should testify in the case since this situation could prove prejudicial. The defense attorney, the judge, Judge Ito's wife, and a university law professor were interviewed. This not only exposes students to varieties (dialects) of American English but provides a fruitful vehicle for applying techniques to compare direct and reported speech. The teacher plays the tape at least two more times for students to fill in details. At this stage, the teacher may ask different student groups to focus only on the substance of one of the four interviews. Student groups can then collaborate to refine their notes and fill in any gaps. If necessary, the tape can then be played again.

The post-listening phase then entails recapping the news clip. The substance of the conversations can be written on the board to facilitate the less proficient students, and also to confirm information extracted by the more proficient ones. Some students may wish to view the video

again. This, the teacher should do since we are teaching, not testing, comprehension. The next step of the exercise then capitalizes on punctuation in direct versus reported speech. The teacher may approach this stage inductively by asking students to transform the blackboard examples into direct speech, e.g.:

Reported speech: "Judge Ito indicated that another judge could preside during the questioning of his wife to avoid prejudice."

Direct: Judge Ito said, "I think another judge could preside during the questioning of my wife to avoid prejudice." (See Footnote 6 below)

Subsequent to the punctuation exercise, a follow-up communicative activity to focus on speaking and listening skills involves a role play. The examples of direct speech provide the substance of dialogues in an interview format at this stage. Students become sensitized to register, vocabulary usage, prosodic features, and the guidance that punctuation in their written scripts provides for expressing these nuances in oral expression (e.g., ellipsis indicates a pause or hesitation, or affectively, an exclamation point may signal surprise, vociferous objection, or some other emotion).

Style Sheets: Student-generated Rules of Usage

The teacher can guide more advanced students in groups to generate rules or "style sheets" (Little 1993) for punctuation in specific contexts such as reported speech or direct speech. Advertisements are representative of a genre that is characterized by unconnected prose and requires idiosyncratic rules that depart significantly from prescribed norms. Student groups can compare their style sheets to determine which functions are performed by the apostrophe in different contexts and develop a taxonomy for their usage. (See Footnote 7 below) Pedagogical considerations include the teacher's selection of materials appropriate to the learners' proficiency level, age, educational background, learning objectives and most importantly, cross-cultural awareness.

Unpunctuated Text Exercise-testing Others

This last assignment is particularly provocative and reinforcing, especially if the teacher is a participant. Each student is provided with at least three copies of one unpunctuated text to administer to peers and other EFL teachers. The teacher selects a text that is brief, contains standard English, is level-appropriate and contains a topic familiar to the students. After the "tests" have been administered, students divide into groups in class to compare their findings, which invariably results in animated discussion about sentence boundaries and areas of variation. When students recognize that careless errors are committed by novices (peers) and veterans (teachers) alike, they recognize that no one is an infallible prescriptivist-an effective way of

lowering the affective filter! Furthermore, students' confidence is increased as they learn that there is considerable variation and creativity in styles of punctuation.

The seemingly monotonous, mechanical task of learning punctuation can be integrated in the communicative EFL classroom. Students will realize that language is flexible and creative, even in the realm of punctuation. The selection of punctuation is neither an arbitrary nor purely mechanical choice but rather, part of language that conforms to some established pattern or criteria. Students can accept the notion that punctuation can and does violate prescriptive notions, depending on such factors as the medium, the intended message, and the audience. Finally, the types of activities that can be exploited to teach punctuation creatively and to maximize opportunities that foster communicative competence are only limited by the teacher's imagination!

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Appendix A

Sample unpunctuated text

ALICE FOUND A BOOK WHICH SEEMED TO BE IN A PECULIAR LANGUAGE BUT WHEN SHE HELD IT TO THE LOOKING GLASS SHE FOUND THAT SHE COULD READ THIS POEM IT SEEMS VERY PRETTY SHE SAID WHEN SHE HAD FINISHED IT BUT ITS RATHER HARD TO UNDERSTAND SOMEHOW IT SEEMS TO FILL MY HEAD WITH IDEAS ONLY I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THEY ARE HOWEVER SOMEBODY KILLED SOMETHING THAT'S CLEAR AT ANY RATE

Jabberwockyby Lewis Carroll

Appendix B

Some punctuation phenomena in written English

A. In the following exercises, ambiguity in meaning can be prevented by the useof commas. Can youdistinguish the meanings of the sentence pairs? (Taken from Sedley, 1990.)

1. The Greeks, who **were philosophers, loved to talk a lot.**
2. The **Greeks who were philosophers loved to talk a lot.**
B. In these sentences, the writer's intention can be distinguished withpunctuation. Compare the sentencetypes.
3. The children are going to bed at eight o'clock.
4. The children are going to bed at eight o'clock!
5. The children are going to bed at eight o'clock?
6. The children are going to bed at EIGHT o'clock?!
C. Compare the referents, "he" in this pair of sentences.
7. John said he's going.
8. John said, "He's going."
D. Consider how syntactic information is conveyed in this pair.
9. My cousin's friends
10. My cousins' friends
E. Writing may reflect spoken languages in an imperfect way.
11. John whispered the message to Bill and then he whispered it to Mary.
F. Consider in speaking, one can emphasize one word with contrastive stresswhich might be indicated inwriting by visual devices (e.g., bold face type, italics, capitalization,underscoring). Compare the emphasisin this group of sentences:

12. **John** kissed Bill's wife.
13. John **kissed** Bills' wife.
14. John kissed **Bill's** wife.
15. John kissed Bill's **wife** .

Footnote 1
For examples of the comma which can create ambiguity, see Appendix "B"

Footnote 2
One can consider count nouns or pronouns in determiner form as "nouns" while other nouns may be "modifier nouns" (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983:125).

Footnote 3
The reader may refer to P. Khampang, "A study of the 's genitive and the of-genitive in English." Unpublished English 215 paper at UCLA, Fall 1973. (cited in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983).

Footnote 4
It would also be interesting to elicit advanced non-native English learners' responses to form preference.

Footnote 5
Andersen (1979) points out that the Spanish construction (also Italian) for the English 's and noun adjunct is the same:
Possessive: Mario's garden el jardin de Mario
Noun adjunct: a baseball player un jugador de beisbol

The reader may also refer to Andersen, R. 1979. The relationship between first language transfer and second language over generalization: Data from the English of Spanish Speakers. In The Acquisition and use of Spanish and English as first and second languages. ed. R. Andersen. Washington, DC.: TESOL.

Footnote 6

It is also important for the teacher to advise students that reported speech is not always necessarily transliterated into direct speech, especially since the interviewees may differ with respect to status (attorney, policeman, university professor) and may adopt different levels of formality during the interview.

Footnote 7

For example, Little (1993:355) noted that her students discovered three different ways of indicating the end of a declarative sentence: the expected period, bubble, or nothing; or exclamation points, dashes, or ellipses.